THE WORLD.

NUMBER XCIV.

By *ADAM FITZ-ADAM.*

To be continued every THURSDAY.

THURSDAY, *October* the 17th, 1754.

IN my paper of laſt Thurſday, I took notice how much converſation had ſuffered from the ſingular diſpoſition of mankind in our age to appear in every character except their natural one, and to conſider Pedantry as reflecting more diſgrace on the perſons tinctured with it, than any other frailty, or even immorality, incident to our nature. I am, however, far from concluding this principle (univerſal as it is) to be the only obſtruction to rational ſociety: other cauſes, diſtinct in themſelves, or operating in conjunction with it, have conſpired to reduce converſation to the ſtate we lament it in at preſent. I ſhall mention the moſt remarkable of theſe cauſes in the order they occur to me.

ONE

ONE great abuſe of converſation has viſibly ariſen from our miſtaking it's end, which is, the mutual entertainment and inſtruction of each other by a friendly communication of ſentiments. It is ſeriouſly to be wiſhed that this end were purſued, and that every one would contribute with freedom and good-manners to the general improvement from his particular diſcoveries. On the contrary, we are apt to conſider ſociety in no other light than as it gives us an opportunity of diſplaying to advantage our wit, our eloquence, or any other real or imaginary accompliſhment. It is our intention to procure admiration from it, not improvement, and to dazzle our companions with our own brightneſs, rather than to receive light by reflection from them. I knew indeed an inſtance, the very oppoſite to this, in a late perſon of diſtinction, who to very great qualities had united the talents of a moſt agreeable companion. I could never perceive that he ſupported this character by any aſſumed ſuperiority over his company: it was his ſingular faculty to diſcover the genius of other men: no latent merit eſcaped his penetration, though the proprietor ſeemed induſtrious to conceal it from the world, and even from himſelf. With this advantage, he had the art to engage every member of the company on that particular ſubject, which he was capable of maintaining with eaſe to himſelf, and benefit to ſociety. He himſelf at the ſame time pretended to no more than a common part in that converſation, which derived it's merit entirely from his addreſs. The tendency of ſuch behaviour to enlarge knowledge, as well as to procure eſteem, cannot fail of appearing very evidently to my readers.

THERE is another defect, very cloſely connected with the abuſe above-mentioned, which has proved equally pernicious to converſation: I mean the peremptorineſs and warmth that are employed in modern conferences. Indeed, whether we write or converſe, the haughty manner, the ſelf-ſufficiency, and the contempt of our opponent that we mix with our arguments, have conſiderably prevented the advancement of truth and conviction of error. Modern diſputants by this method have ſubjected their cauſe, though perhaps founded in demonſtration, to great diſadvantages; ſince they have not only the prejudices of mankind to combat, but have imprudently intereſted their paſſions too againſt them.

In

In debates, perhaps purely ſpeculative, a perſon is obliged not only to defend the point in controverſy, but even his underſtanding and moral character, which are united to the queſtion by the management of his adverſary. Sir Iſaac Newton and Mr. Locke, ornaments to their country, their age, and human nature, have been frequently repreſented as men of weak heads and bad hearts, by perſons eſteeming themſelves nothing leſs than philoſophers. It does not indeed appear to the unprejudiced, that gravitation and coheſion have any viſible connection with ethics; that an attempt to aſcertain the powers of the underſtanding has a tendency to undermine revelation; or that theſe writers deſerved to be conſidered in any other light than as ingenious enthuſiaſts, if reaſon and univerſal experience had not confirmed their enquiries to be as true as they were beautiful. I have often thought that the reception of the Platonic philoſophy in the world may be attributed more to the manner of it's delivery, than to the ſuperiour excellence of it. If we except the moral part, which is divinely treated, it's diſcoveries in phyſics and other branches of ſcience did not entitle it to be advanced above that of other ſects, particularly the Ariſtotelian. The difference was, that the *ipſe dixits* and dogmatical poſitions of the one, made it unpalatable; while modeſty, politeneſs, and deference to the reaſon and dignity of mankind rendered the other lovely even to it's adverſaries. They were induced by the addreſs of it to purſue the conſequences of their own opinions till they led them to abſurdity, and were not aſhamed of a concluſion which ſeemed to be the effect of their own examination. The ſame management enclined them to adopt with chearfulneſs thoſe principles, which were eſtabliſhed on the ruins of their favourite prejudices. It is a little extraordinary that the ſucceſs of this milder method of diſputation ſhould have had no greater influence on ſucceeding ages; eſpecially ſince the Divine Founder of chriſtianity has, by his own example, ſo eminently recommended the ſame practice. The errors of mankind were treated by him with the tenderneſs of a parent; and even divine truths introduced into the mind by perſuaſion rather than authority. The delivery of them in parables was excellently calculated to diveſt men of prejudices and paſſions, and to exclude the conſideration of ſelf-intereſt from the queſtion; at the

the ſame time that it ſhewed an indulgence to the underſtanding, by propoſing chiefly general truths, and leaving their particular application to ourſelves.

THE fatal influence of politics on ſociety, in a country divided into parties like our own, has been too often mentioned to require illuſtration. I ſhall obſerve only, that it has been the occaſion of excluding a variety of uſeful knowledge from converſation, even with men of the moſt moderate principles. They have been cautious of engaging on any ſubject, which might accidently lead to that of politics; and from the natural relation of one ſcience to another, have by this means precluded themſelves from almoſt every branch of inſtructive converſation. It was obſervable at the table of a late great man, that obſcenity was too often the ſubject of diſcourſe, which he himſelf appeared not ſufficiently to diſcountenance. To ſome ſerious perſons, who took offence at his conduct, he made the following apology. "I have "attempted, ſays he, in vain to ſtart other ſubjects, "and at the ſame time preſerve the harmony of my "company. If, for inſtance, I introduce the ſtate of "ancient and modern learning, we enter very ſoon into "a compariſon of the governments they have flouriſhed "under, to the diſadvantage of the preſent one, and "the perſons that conduct it. If the ſubject has been "philoſophy, I have ſometimes apprehended that it "would conclude with laying hands on the hilts of "ſwords, from diviſions on toleration, and occaſional "conformity. I am therefore under the neceſſity of "conniving at a ſubject, in which alone whig and tory, "churchman and diſſenter, miniſterial and anti-miniſterial man unite together with any degree of chearfulneſs.

ANOTHER impediment to the revival of converſation may be aſcribed to our notion of it's being intended as a relaxation from every thing ſerious, uſeful, or moral. The mind has been compared to a bow, which is ſometimes unbent to preſerve it's elaſticity: and becauſe the bow is uſeleſs in a ſtate of remiſſion, we make the ſame concluſion of the human mind. Whereas the mind is an active principle, and naturally impatient of eaſe; it may loſe indeed it's vigour by being employed too intenſe-

ly

ly on particular ſubjects, but recovers itſelf again, rather by varying it's application, than by continuing inactive. Hiſtory, poetry, and the lighter parts of ſcience more agreeably relieve us from abſtracted ſtudies, than a total indolence and diſſipation. It is this continued, though varied exerciſe of the mind, in the hours of leiſure as well as of buſineſs, that ſeems to have given the ancients that ſuperiority over the moderns, which we are more ready to acknowledge, than to enquire into the reaſon of. Even Tully himſelf, if he had dedicated his retirement to thoſe amuſements that employ the modern world, might have been delivered to poſterity with no greater reputation, than what he was entitled to from the character of an eminent pleader and politician. It was in that retirement, and in the hours of converſation, that he exhauſted thoſe ſubjects of reaſon and philoſophy, which have rendered him the admiration of mankind. I was engaged lately in converſation with ſome friends on a particular branch of writing, that of dialogue. Every one admired the eaſe of the ancients in it, and condemned the moderns as ſtiff and unnatural. I agreed in opinion with them, but thought their reflections as much a ſatire on the age as the writers. Modern dialogue appears unnatural, becauſe the ſcenes, the perſons, and the ſubjects it aſſociates, are ſeldom united in real life. It was natural for an ancient writer to repreſent Varro, Atticus, Brutus, &c. diſcuſſing ſubjects of the moſt importance to mankind in portico's or gardens, becauſe the great men of Rome frequently ſpent their retirement in this manner. It would ſeem the very reverſe to introduce in our days ſir Thomas requeſting my lord duke to reſume his arguments for the immateriality of the ſoul under the ſhade of a beach tree, or entreating him to penetrate into the receſſes of the wood, that he may purſue without interruption his enquiry into the foundation of morality. The reaſon is, that diſquiſitions of this kind do not frequently engage the thoughts of our great men; or if they really think of them, they appropriate thinking to the particular apartments they call their ſtudies. When they chance to penetrate into the gloom of woods, it is in purſuit of game, not of truth. The converſation in gardens is not often of an elevated kind; and the circular ſeats round ſpreading trees uſually inſpire other thoughts than abſtracted ideas.